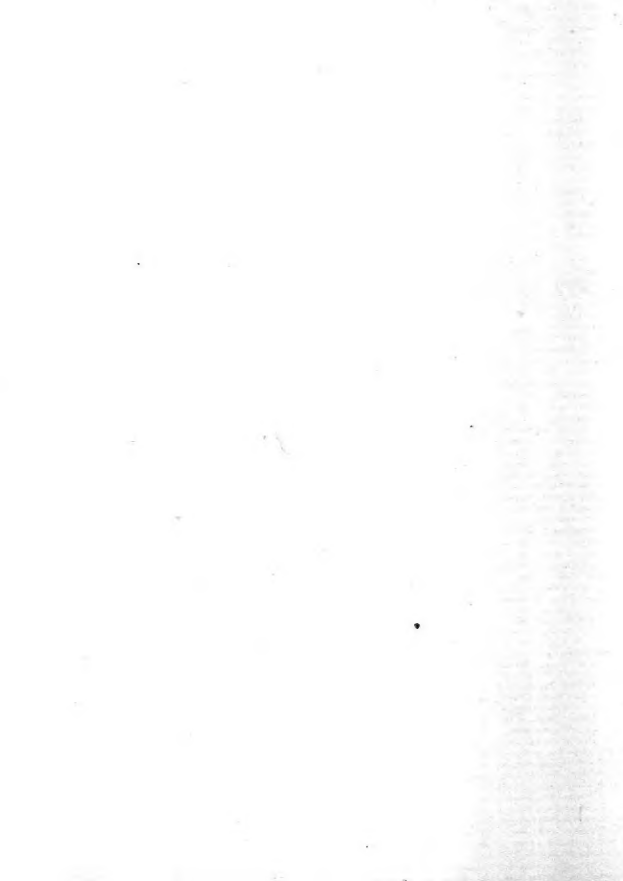




XARTELLA

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XARTELLA

BY

✓
FLORENCE CARPENTER DIEUDONNÉ.



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TO
MY SISTER.

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XARTELLA

BY

FLORENCE CARPENTER DIEUDONNÉ.

CHAPTER FIRST.

THE DESERT.

The sapphire night slept on the desert's ghostly breast, our camp fires burned low upon the sands and wondrous hosts of stars marched 'cross the skies. On one side rose a crumbling pyramid, on the other were the still tents, their striped folds tinged red from the dying embers. The camels, heaped in ungainly rest, had groaned themselves to sleep. The horses were motionless. Silence had fallen upon the explorers' camp.

I had cast myself down upon a pile of saddle-cloths and rugs to look awhile at the glory of the stars, to glance, with an eerie chill, at the darkening

form of the old stone pile, to meditate upon the mystery which seemed to live with the sands.

Some one moved beside me. It was that old stranger who had joined us the day before we left Cairo. He might have been the spirit of the desert, he seemed in such accord with time and place. His tall form was wrapped with a cloak of white wool, a great white turban was on his head, his dark face was earnest and anxious, his eyes, fierce and black, glared 'neath heavy brows.

"You do not believe in Xartella?" he questioned.

I had been told that Xartella was a deathless creature, more than man, who had been seen, for centuries, in the vicinity of this pyramid. While I had not the slightest faith in these legends, noting the remonstrative expression in the aged face I hesitated to speak my skepticism.

"I confess—to me there seems insufficient evidence ——"

"Come!" interrupted the stranger, "I will prove that Xartella has existed."

An adventure with a maniac, I thought, as I walked beside him.

"Twelve years have passed since transpired the events which I shall relate," continued my companion as noiselessly we crossed the sands. "I wish to find a certain broken spear handle."

Very mad but, likely, harmless, I thought. With him I climbed up the rocks until he paused and began to search among the rubbish.

"Look, friend," said he, "your young eyes may be able to find the point and part of the handle of a spear."

With assumed diligence I searched until I did find the spear. When it was withdrawn from the sands, in the starlight we could see that the two parts, one of which he carried, united perfectly.

"It is the very spear. My spear!" he said excitedly. "Now let me tell you of Xartella." We sat upon the crumbling stones, and as the stars paled for dawn, I heard this story.

"Xartella! Xartella.

"When first I heard that cry rise from the foot of this pyramid it was white noon. The air shimmered like a veil above the hot surface of the stone. The waste of sand was blinding as it billowed into distance, broken only by those fragments of dead empires which marked their own graves."

“In unbelief I had come, with the others, to search for the lost daughter of one Vor, who was considered to be the wealthiest merchant in Cairo. The maiden had been for months infatuated, or hypnotized, by Xartella and had been watched, constantly, to prevent her flying across the desert to his home. At last she had escaped her guards. Immense rewards were offered and, I thought, I might find the foolish lady. So, it chanced, there we all stood, in the blistering noon, when in an instant's time all doubt vanished. For there stood Xartella, at the foot of the pyramid.”

“No wonder that they called him a god. A man so majestic that not even that mass of stone towering above him could dwarf him into human insignificance. Robed in fabric wrought over with gems, from head to foot he blazed like another sun. Beneath his antique crown was a face grand, dark, strong. It might have borrowed its repose from the Sphynx, its glory from an eternity, its cruelty from a demon.”

“When the gaze of those wondrous deep eyes struck mine I could not move, I felt myself grow chill. I tried to call out, as did all the others, ‘Xartella,’ but my lips were cold and trembled.

I could utter no word. Then the mystery looked away. I breathed again, moved and called 'Xartella' with the rest. With others hastened forward to capture him."

"Capture Xartella—Capture the stones of the pyramid. Capture the loneliness of the desert! The Arabs were right. He was more than human. He might be a thousand years old; ten thousand years old. When he looked with those terrible eyes across that plain, of which the very legends had been stolen by time, into what splendors of memory did the ruins lead him. What was that ancient glory of which he was left the only existing miracle? There was stern, supreme majesty on his face. There was mysterious menace in his taper bronze hand uplifted to the sun. There was a cloud of white—a dazzle in our eyes! Xartella stood not at the foot of the pyramid. No one was there. The brilliance had vanished. No more should I see that glorious face; it was gone!"

"A yell of rage rose from the company, together men rushed to the spot where he had stood, searching in the sands for the print of his foot. They hammered the moveless blocks of stone and pried great slabs of rock from the dust, as if they thought

the mighty man had digged himself a grave. Incantations and prayers mingled with beast-like howls of rage; we had all seen him and he had escaped us all."

"Through the weary day we searched until the parting kiss of the sun. The red light fell across the gray wide plain, and wide the plain was gray no more. In lines of scarlet and in lakes of golden mist the air slept, shining. Hill tops burned crimson, for palms purpled slow in death of day."

"Then I saw moving, far off on the sands, a white-robed form. Hastily I raised my glass. Toiling among the purpling vistas was Vor's weary daughter. My horse——"

"Xartella, *Xartella!*"

"He stood again like a fire-red star upon the summit of the pyramid. His dazzling majesty as he stood in the sun made me forget Vor's wandering daughter. Like a swarm the Arabs crawled up the steps of rock. Among them was I, who looked up at the radiant prize, then back at the demoniac faces as one python head after another peered above the terrace, each countenance stamped with the same ferocious determination. Was not Xartella afraid as he looked down from his surrounded stand-

ing place? How could he escape? They were not here to be foiled. They were closing the ring around him; more than two-thirds of the distance to the summit was passed. They were all well armed."

"Once more that fell gaze scathed me. I was dizzy; moved heavily, as one moves in a dream. I saw others clasp their eyes. Some leaned against the rock to rest. A stagnation seemed to fall upon them. They moved not forward. Then I heard a defiant shout; a derisive laugh came down to us. Some few lifted their heads to look. There was a blaze of red light, as if the gorgeous sun had shattered into fragments."

"No man stood upon the summit of the pyramid."

"Xartella was gone."

"At once rose the stricken ones; the blinded began to see; the trembling began to grow ferocious. I found myself still weak and clumsy. I leaned upon my spear—this very broken spear. The shaft was pressed into the crevice between the rocks. As I looked—bewildered—at the place where the flames had flashed, suddenly turned the stone upon which I stood and I fell into depth and

darkness. As I scrambled to my feet the heavy stone swung into its place, shutting out the last ray of evening light. I knew that I was a prisoner within the mighty walls. Alone, forgotten, with only a broken spear in my hand. Already weary—already thirsty. Something told me I was Xartella's prisoner."

"At first I gave myself up to frantic desperation. After awhile I regained sufficient self-control to consider, remembering, resolutely remembering that delirium was destruction. Carefully I examined the walls until I found one narrow passage. A strong current of cool air made me hope that there was some outer door. For some time I proceeded so steadily and evenly that I felt encouraged. Then something crashed in the blackness, covering me with dust. Instinctively I turned back. A great stone had barred the passage. - Whether it were a door or merely an accidental falling of rock I could not tell. I cried out in horror, then rushed on blindly—madly. No return now. The corridor was my fate."

"I seemed to see the sunny courts of Cairo. I was tortured with thirst; I could hear those fountains plashing under the trees. The corridor was

growing lower, narrower. I could not go back. I crawled on my knees. How close it was. The current of air had ceased since the stone fell. If I lifted my head it struck the rock. I thought that soon I should be crushed by the weight above. I crawled like a snake. I lifted my head a little. The rocks were not there! I rose. There was plenty of room. I reached my arms about and touched no walls, and in the darkness danced and laughed because there was space in which to die."

"Then it seemed there was a tinge of light, but I scarce dared trust my eyes. It became brighter and I was obliged to believe. It was light. Soon I found a fountain of cold, clear water nestled in a vine-filled recess; farther on I could see the glow of lamps. One danger was passed. What now?"

CHAPTER SECOND.

VOR'S DAUGHTER.

"Refreshed by the water I was resting, absorbed in speculation as to my best course, when close beside me passed the white-robed form of Vor's daughter. A slow moving vision of golden light seemed she in that black realm. Blonde and with wealth of yellow hair, she resembled not the women of Egypt. Her face and form were perfect, marvelous her beauty, but pale as one dead. She was staring, with no trace of expression in her fixed blue eyes. A hand, in hue and texture like the waxen leaf of a lily, clutched the remnant of a silver-cloth veil; the shoes were lost from her blistered feet, her robe was dust-covered and torn on the hem; it had trailed across wastes of sand."

"This patrician lady made no pause; did not even taste the water. I remembered the many times that we had halted at the wells. I wondered had she endured to pass them all as she passed this fountain. How had she escaped discovery on the

desert, in full sunlight, while hundreds searched for her? But as I thought she was fast leaving me, I rose to follow her."

"We soon came into a large hall of barbaric magnificence. Singular tiles and mosaics of shining and oriental brilliance lined all the upper walls. Open doors, portals and arches undraped gave vistas of antique magnificence. Into this luxury intruded strange, crude relics of antiquity. Some of the apartments blazed with lights; one corner was shrouded in deep shade. Into its obscurity opened a hieroglyphic marked gate which was hung between huge orange-colored posts covered with mystic characters in black."

"When Artossa, Vor's daughter, reached the central hall she dropped like an inanimate object upon the floor. I hastened to her side. She seemed in a stupor of unnatural slumber. I could not tell whether it were weariness or mesmeric state. I brought water, and when I placed the cup at her parched lips she did not drink. Finding I could not rouse her I sought refuge in the shadows beyond the orange gate. Such mystery and singularity were about me that I was scarcely sure I still retained my reason. I wondered if I really experienced what

I thought I did, or if I had gone mad in that corridor. I almost was afraid to move lest I restore some horrible consciousness."

"It would have been better had I selected some other hiding place: no rest was here for a confused brain."

"A deep red hue steeped the gloom, through which slanted shafts of blue light looking like swords dipped in blood. Odd roundish bottles or huge jars were on all sides. A crimson liquid was in them. Peculiar spiced dust filled the air and clouded at every step. Cumbering the way were so many dark objects which yielded and crackled when I stepped upon them that I lighted a match and looked about. It was the only match which I possessed: it showed me—mummies. Hundreds of grinning mummies, piled and shelved and scattered about the floor. Their hideous faces were everywhere. Then the match expired."

"After some time I accustomed myself to the darkness and saw great cases of glass in which lay sleeping persons; some of these were young and beautiful, some were very like mummies. The feet of each one were bathed in the crimson liquid. The entire scheme was incomprehensible to me, who

groped shiveringly among the horrors, hoping to find some unravelment of the mystery, and so doing found the most monstrous iniquity of all. It seemed a living mummy; it moved its eyes and head but did not speak. A tattered cloak covered with ancientest symbolic designs was heavily crumpled upon the withered body. I lifted a portion of the weight from the feeble frame. So doing, I struck down into dust a crown agleam with precious jewels."

"I heard the sound of Xartella's voice. Some powerful influence seemed to coerce me. I moved toward him. It needed all my strength of will, all realization of my danger to keep me in hiding while I beheld him once more."

"He paused beside Artossa and looked at her with deep solemnity upon his face. He seemed to note her torn veil, her tattered dress, her blistered feet. He lifted his hand and slowly moved it, beckoning. A bevy of beautiful slave girls came from an adjoining apartment. I noticed how singular was their step, their feet clicked like machines as they surrounded Artossa. Then Vor's daughter rose to her feet, opened her eyes. Amazement, horror, despair followed the first bewildered look of

her face. She clasped her white hands to her brow and seemed confounded."

"Xartella watched, silently. After a time she turned as if to fly. Then, like a congealing, returned the sonambulistic state and with the same clicking step as the slave she departed into another chamber."

"Xartella, then, came into the Hall of Mummies where I was hidden among the jars. There was now no call upon me, and I could think and act independently. I watched as the mysterious man searched about among the cases, often speaking to the darkness. He removed the jar of crimson liquid from the feet of a beautiful youth, shook him, and lifted him up. The sleeper opened great vacant eyes and stared, sightlessly, at the dark burning eyes of Xartella. Then he followed him through clouds of dust. Click, click, sounded his step as he crossed the great rooms, drew aside a portiere and dropped like a limp doll upon an inanimate collection of the same sort of humanity. Revealed to me by the lifting of the curtain were hundreds like him tossed into a pile of moveless loveliness, as were the mummies heaped in still hideousness."

"It occurred to my mind that these perfect men and women were resurrected mummies, restored

only to physical life. Xartella was their soul. Not even by his art could a soul be hindered in its eternal progression."

"Astounded as I was, the more I considered on this idea the more certain I grew that it must be so. I determined to try an experiment. That elvish creature with the live head !"

"I remembered that the jar which had held the withered feet was very small. In such a multitude of mummies discrimination was impossible. Xartella must have forgotten this one. I would restore it. I changed the small jar for one such as had restored the youth. I filled this jar to the brim with the crimson liquid. In these preparations I found again the crown, which I laid carefully upon the stone shelf. I was sure those dreadful eyes followed the crown with anxious watchfulness. After all this was done I returned, for secrecy, into a grove of large leaved foliage trees which was outside the gate. Here I regaled myself with a delicious fruit, such as I had never tasted, composed myself to rest and fell into a deep slumber. I have always thought I must have slept for days."

CHAPTER THIRD.

APHLAH.

“My first waking thought was of the dark room and my experiment. The Orange Gate was locked, but I climbed upon the stone partition wall and grew cold to behold some moving object. It was in shades and far but it was where I had left that mummy which lived. I crept, noiselessly, around to where the wall was above and beside it.”

“A woman was there. She had risen and twined the dust-filled tatters of the hieroglyphed robe about her. Her words were maledictions, her breath seemed made of sobs. She held, clutched in her claw-like fingers, *that crown*. As she peered through a little wicket in the wall, I judged she could see Artossa, for thus she spake.”

‘Thou infatuate dupe. Thou foil of fiend. Beware ! For the glance of those eyes, thy life. For Xartella’s smile, thy all Eternity. “Willingly a sacrifice” he said. And as he prophesied, the ages of this weary old earth have produced it.’

'She has come across hot sands at his call. Into this dark haven at his bidding. Crowned by his hand, throned by his side. Even while the glamour of her crown is new this maiden lays it down. All this ! and, for him, consents to venture into an unknown futurity in hope to return again, to him, with souls for all these restored of earth.'

'I am Xartella's Queen. Not thou, Artossa. Forsaken. Forgotten. I am Queen and once again I will put on this crown.'

"She rose to her feet; in the sword of blue light I saw her ghastly, impish face distort with rage. She lifted the crown with both hands."

'It is a crown,' she cried, 'for this thing men have died. Have slain those ones best loved. Have whitened hills with rifts of human bones. Have colored rivers red with brothers' blood. It is an awful power, my own ancient crown forged in the fires built by primeval race. All newer crownlets shall fall down before it. I know the glorious life which the crimson fluid can bring back to me. Xartella !'

"Even in that mummy shape was some hint of grandeur, as in that blue she lifted both her leathern arms, raising aloft the crown to place it on her head.

But it was too heavy. She clasped it to her breast and bowed her bald head upon its gems."

'Xartella has forgotten Aphlah. He would send this puny, frightened woman of modern earth to bargain with Archangels. I should be sent. Not such as she. Cruel to steal my power, to let me almost perish, yet not quite. To forget me while the years roll into centuries. Was it that my beauty waned? No. Xartella's red jar would have given to me supernatural loveliness. Rather was it because he deemed my crown more blest than his.'

"I left this thing which I had evoked from mummy life. This creature of the shades. It was no forgotten fate. It was a woman who would restore herself to a majesty which would be most terrible to Artossa."

"But where had the living gone. The beautiful resurrected and the baleful restored became so unendurable to me, that, during the prolonged absence of Xartella and Artossa, I hid myself in the recess of the fountain. There I counted the slanting beams of fourteen sunsets before I heard weird music and the sound of Xartella's voice. Then I forgot my loneliness, forgot Aphlah and myself in

the glory of the picture presented in the old stone halls."

"Artossa was enthroned beside Xartella. Rest had restored her resplendent beauty. Her hair was coiled and diademed. A gossamer robe of gold and rose was bound about with bands of gems. Her feet were cased in broidered shoes."

"Before the thrones whirled all the host of beautiful youths and maidens. Waving salutations with their white or tawny arms. Tossing their long, loose hair and moving, in a mechanical accord, with discordant music, twanged from stringed instruments struck by the hands of dark-skinned musicians. It was bewildering. Majesty, splendor, beauty centered upon the throne. Gorgeous hues burnished, motion glinted the foreground of the scene. Even the jarring music, here, was not unpleasant."

"A great Sarcophagus, of transparent substance, stood, conspicuously, close by the thrones. The lid was raised. From time to time Artossa glanced toward it, almost with dread. But her white hand lay in the clasp of that one dark and strong. The touch seemed to control her."

"Then I heard Xartella explain, in soft voice, with an oriental figurativeness of expression which transformed to a translation the real horror of the desired sacrifice."

"Artossa must consent to enclose herself in the mysterious casket. Death was sure in the thousandth of an instant. Resurrection, Xartella insisted, was, by his art, just as certain. She would be able to procure, through her intercession, souls for all his restored multitudes. When she returned more glorious than other earth creatures she should reign with him for centuries. Not in that dark, contracted realm, beneath a pyramid already crumbling, but in such visioned land as, I was certain, was not builded above the seas of earth and only had foundation in the imaginings of this half god. And this must be a willing sacrifice."

"Listening for her answer Xartella paused, forgetting the lagging dancers. Like dolls they began to drop in their places."

'You see,' he said, 'they have no soul but mine. For their new life, Artossa, will you go?'

'I will go,' replied Artossa, very sad; 'but how can I go willingly and leave you?'

‘You will return.’

‘I may not find the weary way.’

‘Love will lead you back.’

‘In that other sphere may be no love. Whence I am to procure all these souls love may be dead. Love may even forget.’

‘Fond heart, there are not moments in eternity to make true love forget!’

“It was Aphlah! and as she suddenly appeared before us and uttered these words I wondered had she not changed into an angel. Her majesty and beauty paled those others as the sun pales the moon and all the stars. She might have been moulded from moonlight and robed in woven dew drops so marvelous was her humanity, so unreal her shimmering garments.”

“Xartella sprang from the throne to approach her. A look of rapture transfigured his stern face.”

‘Aphlah, my wife——’

“His words were interrupted, this woman of glory lifted to her bronze gold hair that same crown which I had lifted from the dust. And, as she raised it, in dust fell down the antique, brilliant crown which graced Xartella’s haughty head.”

'Xartella, this is my crown. For this crown man has destroyed the one best loved. But, 'tis an ancient ring of power. Behold how newer diadems shall fall before it.'

"I had drawn close to the throne and as Artossa's crown crumbled into dust it fell upon my hand. The maiden, forgotten, at this supreme moment, by her captor, turned to me and with the cry of a young girl's terror, flew from the splendid throne to my arms."

'I do not wish to die,' she sobbed, 'I do not dare to bring those souls, I wish to return to my father's palace. I do not wish to cross the chill river, death. O, to float once more in glory of sunlight on the Nile.' She fell at my feet, weeping, frightened, imploring my aid, and I comforted her with common words of earthly encouragement which seemed strangely out of place."

"Aphlah moved near the sarcophagus."

'Xartella, upon what shore dwells man when he has died to higher life?'

'Let others ask the question, Aphlah. Not such as thou.'

'Not yet a soul for all these dear ones?'

'There is but one dear, on earth. Let these dead rest. Go not across the boundary.'

'I will be your ambassadress. I will seek some friendly archangel and may return with the souls to light your empire of the dead.'

"Xartella moved to prevent her but he seemed chained. The thing which I had thought a fate forgotten now proved itself the more powerful of the two. Aphlah dropped, like a cloud of silver, into the fatal casket. With a heavy jar the lid flashed down."

'Come back! I never meant to let you really perish. There is no light left in my earth. I do not know that I can bring you back. I only waited: O, Aphlah, I never meant that you should die or really be forgotten.'

A fearful sight it was to see the powerful Xartella striving vainly to tear away the lid from the sarcophagus. To see the glinting of the crown through the transparent sides. To note the still face in the majesty of death. Xartella crashed article after article into shatters trying to break that seemingly fragile lid.

'I have called too late. I have waited my repentant words until she hears me not.'

“Then he cast himself down beside the casket and hid his face. Around him lay the still dancers.”

“I whispered to Artossa that we would seek an egress from the pyramid. Even then the great walls began to shudder as if shaken by earthquake. Light, as if of sun, filled all the space. We two shrank away from something, vast and blinding, which neared Xartella. He rose and stood appalled. A voice like the serene music of a singing ocean uttered these words.”

‘Call me not back.

Hear ye that thunder gong

Of the stampeding throng

In miracles of white

In glory swept along?

It is vibratant chord

Of that transcendent song

Which earth can never sing.’

‘Only a man art thou, Xartella. Thou hast no power in heaven. Another cycle I have finished in the great wheel of the worlds. I shall no more

return. Never may life go back. Come thou, come meet me here."

"Then all was dark. Again the pyramid shuddered. Artossa clung to my arm. A great rock fell from the center of the pyramid and as it dropped it buried Xartella and the sarcophagus. The stars of heaven shone down on us. We saw two great white spirits sail grandly away into the distant blue."

The speaker ceased.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"My story is ended."

"But, Artossa?"

"She followed Aphlah's call and died three days after I had restored her to her father's house."

Then the old man pressed the spear into the seam of the stones. I was not surprised to see the rock turn and reveal a pit. But, in the gray dawn, I saw the flash of steel. Before my eyes the stranger fell, a corpse, into the black. I roused the camp. Now listen, this is the strangest of it all. We found that corridor. We found the great stone surrounded with bleached bones and mummied forms. We found dozens of great jars with a dry, red powder in them. One of the men stepped

upon a white ball which burst and enveloped him in an impenetrable white light, in which he was invisible for half a minute. Another found a number of great fan-like structures of glass, in colors red, yellow and blue. These, when flashed open in the sun, gave the effect of a great dazzling star.

I found only this. I suppose it to be a piece of the broken sarcophagus. In all the earth I have found no other substance like it.

THE END.